

CONTINUOUS PRESSURE MOLTEN METAL SUPPLY SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR FORMING CONTINUOUS METAL ARTICLES

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Application Serial No. 10/014,649 entitled "Continuous Pressure Molten Metal Supply System and Method" filed December 11, 2001, and a continuation-in-part of U.S. Application Serial No. 09/957,846 entitled "Injector for Continuous Pressure Molten Metal Supply System" filed September 21, 2001, and which claim the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application Serial No. 60/284,952 entitled "Method and Apparatus for Extruding Metal" filed April 19, 2001, which is incorporated herein in its entirety.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention relates to a molten metal supply system and, more particularly, a continuous pressure molten metal supply system and method for forming continuous metal articles of indefinite length.

2. Description of the Prior Art

[0003] The metal working process known as extrusion involves pressing metal stock (ingot or billet) through a die opening having a predetermined configuration in order to form a shape having a longer length and a substantially constant cross-section. For example, in the extrusion of aluminum alloys, the aluminum stock is preheated to the proper extrusion temperature. The aluminum stock is then placed into a heated cylinder. The cylinder utilized in the extrusion process has a die opening at one end of the desired shape and a reciprocal piston or ram having approximately the same cross-sectional dimensions as the bore of the cylinder. This piston or ram moves against the aluminum stock to compress the aluminum stock. The opening in the die is the path of least resistance for the aluminum stock under pressure. The aluminum stock deforms and flows through the die opening to produce an extruded product having the same cross-sectional shape as the die opening.

[0004] Referring to Fig. 1, the foregoing described extrusion process is identified by reference numeral 10, and typically consists of several discrete and discontinuous operations including: melting 20, casting 30, homogenizing 40, optionally sawing 50, reheating 60, and

finally, extrusion 70. The aluminum stock is cast at an elevated temperature and typically cooled to room temperature. Because the aluminum stock is cast, there is a certain amount of inhomogeneity in the structure and the aluminum stock is heated to homogenize the cast metal. Following the homogenization step, the aluminum stock is cooled to room temperature. After cooling, the homogenized aluminum stock is reheated in a furnace to an elevated temperature called the preheat temperature. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that the preheat temperature is generally the same for each billet that is to be extruded in a series of billets and is based on experience. After the aluminum stock has reached the preheat temperature, it is ready to be placed in an extrusion press and extruded.

[0005] All of the foregoing steps relate to practices that are well known to those skilled in the art of casting and extruding. Each of the foregoing steps is related to metallurgical control of the metal to be extruded. These steps are very cost intensive, with energy costs incurring each time the metal stock is reheated from room temperature. There are also in-process recovery costs associated with the need to trim the metal stock, labor costs associated with process inventory, and capital and operational costs for the extrusion equipment.

[0006] Attempts have been made in the prior art to design an extrusion apparatus that will operate directly with molten metal. U.S. Patent No. 3,328,994 to Lindemann discloses one such example. The Lindemann patent discloses an apparatus for extruding metal through an extrusion nozzle to form a solid rod. The apparatus includes a container for containing a supply of molten metal and an extrusion die (i.e., extrusion nozzle) located at the outlet of the container. A conduit leads from a bottom opening of the container to the extrusion nozzle. A heated chamber is located in the conduit leading from the bottom opening of the container to the extrusion nozzle and is used to heat the molten metal passing to the extrusion nozzle. A cooling chamber surrounds the extrusion nozzle to cool and solidify the molten metal as it passes therethrough. The container is pressurized to force the molten metal contained in the container through the outlet conduit, heated chamber and ultimately, the extrusion nozzle.

[0007] U.S. Patent No. 4,075,881 to Kreidler discloses a method and device for making rods, tubes, and profiled articles directly from molten metal by extrusion through use of a forming tool and die. The molten metal is charged into a receiving compartment of the device in successive batches that are cooled so as to be transformed into a thermal-plastic condition. The successive batches build up layer-by-layer to form a bar or other similar article.

[0008] U.S. Patent Nos. 4,774,997 and 4,718,476, both to Eibe, disclose an apparatus and method for continuous extrusion casting of molten metal. In the apparatus disclosed by the Eibe patents, molten metal is contained in a pressure vessel that may be pressurized with air or an inert gas such as argon. When the pressure vessel is pressurized, the molten metal contained therein is forced through an extrusion die assembly. The extrusion die assembly includes a mold that is in fluid communication with a downstream sizing die. Spray nozzles are positioned to spray water on the outside of the mold to cool and solidify the molten metal passing therethrough. The cooled and solidified metal is then forced through the sizing die. Upon exiting the sizing die, the extruded metal in the form of a metal strip is passed between a pair of pinch rolls and further cooled before being wound on a coiler.

[0009] An object of the present invention is to provide a molten metal supply system that may be used to supply molten metal to downstream metal-working or forming processes at substantially constant working pressures and flow rates. It is a further object of the present invention to provide a molten metal supply system and method capable of forming continuous metal articles of indefinite lengths.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0010] The above objects are generally accomplished by a method of forming continuous metal articles of indefinite length as described herein. The method may generally include the steps of: providing a plurality of molten metal injectors each having an injector housing and a piston reciprocally operable within the housing, with the injectors each in fluid communication with a molten metal supply source and an outlet manifold, and with the piston of each of the injectors movable through a first stroke wherein molten metal is received into the respective housings from the molten metal supply source, and a second stroke wherein the injectors each provide molten metal to the outlet manifold under pressure, and wherein the outlet manifold includes a plurality of outlet dies for forming continuous metal articles of indefinite length, with the outlet dies configured to cool and solidify the molten metal to form the metal articles; serially actuating the injectors to move the respective pistons through their first and second strokes at different times to provide substantially constant molten metal flow rate and pressure to the outlet manifold; cooling the molten metal in the outlet dies to form semi-solid state metal in the respective outlet dies; solidifying the semi-state metal in the outlet dies to form solidified metal having an as-cast structure; discharging the solidified metal through outlet die apertures defined

by the respective outlet dies to form the metal articles.

[0011] The method may include the step of working the solidified metal in the outlet dies to generate a wrought structure in the solidified metal before the step of discharging the solidified metal through the die apertures. The step of working the solidified metal in the outlet dies may be performed in a divergent-convergent chamber located upstream of the die aperture of each of the outlet dies.

[0012] The outlet dies may each include an outlet die passage communicating with the die aperture for conveying the metal to the die aperture. The die aperture may define a smaller cross sectional area than the die passage. The step of working the solidified metal may be performed by discharging the solidified metal through the smaller cross section die aperture of each of the outlet dies. At least one of the outlet dies may have a die passage defining a smaller cross sectional area than the corresponding die aperture. The step of working the solidified metal in the at least one outlet die may be performed by discharging the solidified metal from the smaller cross section die passage into the corresponding larger cross section die aperture.

[0013] The method may include the step of discharging the solidified metal of at least one of the metal articles through a second outlet die defining a die aperture. The second outlet die may be located downstream of the first outlet die. The second die aperture may define a smaller cross sectional area than the first die aperture. The method may then include the step of further working the solidified metal of the at least one metal article to form the wrought structure by discharging the solidified metal through the second die aperture.

[0014] The method may include the step of working the solidified metal forming at least one of the metal articles to generate wrought structure in the at least one metal article, with the working step occurring downstream of the outlet dies. The working step may be performed by a plurality of rolls in contact with the at least one metal article. The at least one metal article may be a continuous plate or continuous ingot.

[0015] The die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may have a symmetrical cross section with respect to at least one axis passing therethrough for forming a metal article having a symmetrical cross section. Additionally, the die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may be configured to form a circular shaped cross section metal article. Further, the die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may be configured to form a polygonal shaped cross section metal article. The die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may also be configured to form an

annular shaped cross section metal article. Furthermore, the die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may have an asymmetrical cross section for forming a metal article having an asymmetrical cross section.

[0016] The die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may have a symmetrical cross section with respect to at least one axis passing therethrough for forming a metal article having a symmetrical cross section, and the die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may have an asymmetrical cross section for forming a metal article having an asymmetrical cross section.

[0017] A plurality of rolls may be associated with each of the outlet dies and in contact with the formed metal articles downstream of the respective die apertures. The method may then further include the step of providing backpressure to the plurality of injectors through frictional contact between the rolls and metal articles. At least one of the die apertures is preferably configured to form a continuous plate. The method may then also include the step of further working the solidified metal forming the continuous plate with the rolls to generate the wrought structure.

[0018] The outlet dies may each include an outlet die passage communicating with the die aperture for conveying the metal to the die aperture. At least one of the outlet dies may have a die passage defining a smaller cross sectional area than the corresponding die aperture, so that the method may include the step of working the solidified metal to generate wrought structure by discharging the solidified metal from the smaller cross section die passage into the corresponding larger cross section die aperture of the at least one outlet die. The larger cross section die aperture may be configured to form a continuous ingot. A plurality of rolls may be in contact with the ingot downstream of the at least one outlet die, so that the method may further including the step of providing backpressure to the plurality of injectors through frictional contact between the rolls and ingot. The method may further include the step of further working the solidified metal forming the ingot with the rolls to generate the wrought structure.

[0019] The metal articles formed by the foregoing described method make take any of the following shapes, however the present method is not limited to the following listed shapes: a solid rod having a polygonal or circular shaped cross section; a circular or polygonal shaped cross section tube; a plate having a polygonal shaped cross section; and ingot having a polygonal or circular shaped cross section.

[0020] The present invention is also an apparatus for forming continuous metal articles of

indefinite length. The apparatus includes an outlet manifold and a plurality of outlet dies. The outlet manifold is configured for fluid communication with a source of molten metal. The plurality of outlet dies is in fluid communication with the outlet manifold. The outlet dies are configured to form a plurality of continuous metal articles of indefinite length. The outlet dies are each further comprised of a die housing attached to the outlet manifold. The die housing defines a die aperture configured to form the cross sectional shape of the continuous metal article exiting the outlet die. The die housing also defines a die passage in fluid communication with the outlet manifold for conveying metal to the outlet die aperture. Additionally, the die housing defines a coolant chamber surrounding at least a portion of the die passage for cooling and solidifying molten metal received from the outlet manifold and passing through the die passage to the die aperture.

[0021] The die passage of at least one of the outlet dies may define a divergent-convergent located upstream of the corresponding die aperture. The die passage of at least one of the outlet dies may include a mandrel positioned therein to form an annular shaped cross section metal article. A plurality of rolls may be associated with each of the outlet dies and positioned to contact the formed metal articles downstream of the respective die apertures for frictionally engaging the metal articles and apply backpressure to the molten metal in the manifold.

[0022] At least one of the die passages of the outlet dies may define a larger cross sectional area than the cross sectional area defined by the corresponding die aperture. At least one of the die passages may define a smaller cross sectional area than the cross sectional area defined by the corresponding die aperture.

[0023] The die passage of at least one of the outlet dies may define a larger cross sectional area than the cross sectional area defined by the corresponding die aperture. A second outlet die may be located downstream of the at least one outlet die. The second outlet die may define a die aperture having a smaller cross sectional area than the corresponding upstream die aperture. The second outlet die may be fixedly attached to the upstream outlet die.

[0024] The die housing of each of the outlet dies may be fixedly attached to the outlet manifold. Additionally, the die housing of each of the outlet dies may be integrally formed with the outlet manifold.

[0025] The die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may be configured to form a

circular shaped cross section metal article. In addition, the die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may be configured to form a polygonal shaped cross section metal article. Further, the die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may be configured to form an annular shaped cross section metal article. The die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may have an asymmetrical cross section for forming a metal article having an asymmetrical cross section. Furthermore, the die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may have a symmetrical cross section with respect to at least one axis passing therethrough for forming a metal article having a symmetrical cross section.

[0026] The die aperture of at least one of the outlet dies may be configured to form a continuous plate or a continuous ingot. The continuous ingot may have a polygonal shaped or circular shaped cross section. The continuous plate may also have a polygonal shaped cross section.

[0027] The apparatus may further include a single outlet die having a die housing defining a die aperture and a die passage in fluid communication with the outlet manifold. The die housing may further define a coolant chamber at least partially surrounding the die passage. The die aperture is preferably configured to form the cross sectional shape of the continuous metal article.

[0028] Further details and advantages of the present invention will become apparent from the following detailed description read in conjunction with the drawings, wherein like parts are designated with like reference numerals.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0029] Fig. 1 is a schematic view of a prior art extrusion process;

[0030] Fig. 2 is a cross-sectional view of a molten metal supply system including a molten metal supply source, a plurality of molten metal injectors, and an outlet manifold according to a first embodiment of the present invention;

[0031] Fig. 3 is a cross-sectional view of one of the injectors of the molten metal supply system of Fig. 2 showing the injector at the beginning of a displacement stroke;

[0032] Fig. 4 is a cross-sectional view of the injector of Fig. 3 showing the injector at the beginning of a return stroke;

[0033] Fig. 5 is a graph of piston position versus time for one injection cycle of the injector of Figs. 3 and 4;

[0034] Fig. 6 is an alternative gas supply and venting arrangement for the injector of Figs. 3 and 4;

[0035] Fig. 7 is a graph of piston position versus time for the multiple injectors of the molten metal supply system of Fig. 2;

[0036] Fig. 8 is a cross-sectional view of the molten metal supply system also including a molten metal supply source, a plurality of molten metal injectors, and an outlet manifold according to a second embodiment of the present invention;

[0037] Fig. 9 is a cross-sectional view of the outlet manifold used in the molten metal supply systems of Figs. 2 and 8 showing the outlet manifold supplying molten metal to an exemplary downstream process;

[0038] Fig. 10 is plan cross sectional view of an apparatus for forming a plurality of continuous metal articles of indefinite length in accordance with the present invention, which incorporates the manifold of Figs. 8 and 9;

[0039] Fig. 11a is a cross sectional view of an outlet die configured to form a solid cross section metal article;

[0040] Fig. 11b is a cross sectional view of the solid cross section metal article formed by the outlet die of Fig. 11a;

[0041] Fig. 12a is a cross sectional view of an outlet die configured to form an annular cross section metal article;

[0042] Fig. 12b is a cross sectional view of the annular cross section metal article formed by the outlet die of Fig. 12a;

[0043] Fig. 13 is a cross sectional view of a third embodiment of the outlet dies shown in Fig. 10;

[0044] Fig. 14 is a cross sectional view taken along lines 14-14 in Fig. 13;

[0045] Fig. 15 is a cross sectional view taken along lines 15-15 in Fig. 13;

[0046] Fig. 16 is a front end view of the outlet die of Fig. 13;

[0047] Fig. 17 is a cross sectional view of an outlet die for use with the apparatus of Fig. 10 having a second outlet die attached thereto for further reducing the cross sectional area of the metal article;

[0048] Fig. 18 is a cross sectional view of an outlet die configured to form a continuous metal plate in accordance with the present invention;

[0049] Fig. 19 is a cross sectional view of an outlet die configured to form a continuous metal ingot in accordance with the present invention;

[0050] Fig. 20 is perspective view of the metal plate formed by the outlet die of Fig. 18;

[0051] Fig. 21a is a perspective view of the metal ingot formed by the outlet die of Fig. 19 and having a polygonal shaped cross section;

[0052] Fig 21b is a perspective view of the metal ingot formed by the outlet die of Fig. 19 and having a circular shaped cross section;

[0053] Fig. 22 is a schematic cross sectional view of an outlet die aperture configured to form a continuous metal I-beam of indefinite length;

[0054] Fig. 23 is a schematic cross sectional view of an outlet die aperture configured to form a continuous profiled rod of indefinite length;

[0055] Fig. 24 is a schematic cross sectional view of an outlet die aperture configured to form a continuous circular shaped metal article defining a square shaped central opening; and

[0056] Fig. 25 is a schematic cross sectional view of an outlet die aperture configured to form a square shaped metal article defining a square shaped central opening.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0057] The present invention is directed to a molten metal supply system incorporating at least two (i.e., a plurality of) molten metal injectors. The molten metal supply system may be used to deliver molten metal to a downstream metal working or metal forming apparatus or process. In particular, the molten metal supply system is used to provide molten metal at substantially constant flow rates and pressures to such downstream metal working or forming processes as extrusion, forging, and rolling. Other equivalent downstream processes are within the scope of the present invention.

[0058] Referring to Figs. 2-4, a molten metal supply system 90 in accordance with the present invention includes a plurality of molten metal injectors 100 separately identified with "a", "b", and "c" designations for clarity. The three molten metal injectors 100a, 100b, 100c shown in Fig. 2 are an exemplary illustration of the present invention and the minimum number of injectors 100 required for the molten metal supply system 90 is two as indicated previously. The injectors 100a, 100b, 100c are identical and their component parts are described hereinafter in terms of a single injector "100" for clarity.

[0059] The injector 100 includes a housing 102 that is used to contain molten metal prior

to injection to a downstream apparatus or process. A piston 104 extends downward into the housing 102 and is reciprocally operable within the housing 102. The housing 102 and piston 104 are preferably cylindrically shaped. The piston 104 includes a piston rod 106 and a pistonhead 108 connected to the piston rod 106. The piston rod 106 has a first end 110 and a second end 112. The pistonhead 108 is connected to the first end 110 of the piston rod 106. The second end 112 of the piston rod 106 is coupled to a hydraulic actuator or ram 114 for driving the piston 104 through its reciprocal movement. The second end 112 of the piston rod 106 is coupled to the hydraulic actuator 114 by a self-aligning coupling 116. The pistonhead 108 preferably remains located entirely within the housing 102 throughout the reciprocal movement of the piston 104. The pistonhead 108 may be formed integrally with the piston rod 106 or separately therefrom.

[0060] The first end 110 of the piston rod 106 is connected to the pistonhead 108 by a thermal insulation barrier 118, which may be made of zinconia or a similar material. An annular pressure seal 120 is positioned about the piston rod 106 and includes a portion 121 extending within the housing 102. The annular pressure seal 120 provides a substantially gas tight seal between the piston rod 106 and housing 102.

[0061] Due to the high temperatures of the molten metal with which the injector 100 is used, the injector 100 is preferably cooled with a cooling medium, such as water. For example, the piston rod 106 may define a central bore 122. The central bore 122 is in fluid communication with a cooling water source (not shown) through an inlet conduit 124 and an outlet conduit 126, which pass cooling water through the interior of the piston rod 106. Similarly, the annular pressure seal 120 may be cooled by a cooling water jacket 128 that extends around the housing 102 and is located substantially coincident with the pressure seal 120. The injectors 100a, 100b, 100c may be commonly connected to a single cooling water source.

[0062] The injectors 100a, 100b, 100c, according to the present invention, are preferably suitable for use with molten metals having a low melting point such as aluminum, magnesium, copper, bronze, alloys including the foregoing metals, and other similar metals. The present invention further envisions that the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c may be used with ferrous-containing metals as well, alone or in combination with the above-listed metals. Accordingly, the housing 102, piston rod 106, and pistonhead 108 for each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c

are made of high temperature resistant metal alloys that are suitable for use with molten aluminum and molten aluminum alloys, and the other metals and metal alloys identified hereinabove. The pistonhead 108 may also be made of refractory material or graphite. The housing 102 has a liner 130 on its interior surface. The liner 130 may be made of refractory material, graphite, or other materials suitable for use with molten aluminum, molten aluminum alloys, or any of the other metals or metal alloys identified previously.

[0063] The piston 104 is generally movable through a return stroke in which molten metal is received into the housing 102 and a displacement stroke for displacing the molten metal from the housing 102. Fig. 3 shows the piston 104 at a point just before it begins a displacement stroke (or at the end of a return stroke) to displace molten metal from the housing 102. Fig. 4, conversely, shows the piston 104 at the end of a displacement stroke (or at the beginning of a return stroke).

[0064] The molten metal supply system 90 further includes a molten metal supply source 132 to maintain a steady supply of molten metal 134 to the housing 102 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c. The molten metal supply source 132 may contain any of the metals or metal alloys discussed previously.

[0065] The injector 100 further includes a first valve 136. The injector 100 is in fluid communication with the molten metal supply source 132 through the first valve 136. In particular, the housing 102 of the injector 100 is in fluid communication with the molten metal supply source 132 through the first valve 136, which is preferably a check valve for preventing backflow of molten metal 134 to the molten metal supply source 132 during the displacement stroke of the piston 104. Thus, the first check valve 136 permits inflow of molten metal 134 to the housing 102 during the return stroke of the piston 104.

[0066] The injector 100 further includes an intake/injection port 138. The first check valve 136 is preferably located in the intake/injection port 138 (hereinafter "port 138"), which is connected to the lower end of the housing 102. The port 138 may be fixedly connected to the lower end of the housing 102 by any means customary in the art, or formed integrally with the housing.

[0067] The molten metal supply system 90 further includes an outlet manifold 140 for supplying molten metal 134 to a downstream apparatus or process. The injectors 100a, 100b, 100c are each in fluid communication with the outlet manifold 140. In particular, the port 138 of

each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c is used as the inlet or intake into each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c, and further used to distribute (i.e., inject) the molten metal 134 displaced from the housing 102 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c to the outlet manifold 140.

[0068] The injector 100 further includes a second check valve 142, which is preferably located in the port 138. The second check valve 142 is similar to the first check valve 136, but is now configured to provide an outlet conduit for the molten metal 134 received into the housing 102 of the injector 100 to be displaced from the housing 102 and into the outlet manifold 140 and the ultimate downstream process.

[0069] The molten metal supply system 90 further includes a pressurized gas supply source 144 in fluid communication with each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c. The gas supply source 144 may be a source of inert gas, such as helium, nitrogen, or argon, a compressed air source, or carbon dioxide. In particular, the housing 102 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c is in fluid communication with the gas supply source 144 through respective gas control valves 146a, 146b, 146c.

[0070] The gas supply source 144 is preferably a common source that is connected to the housing 102 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c. The gas supply source 144 is provided to pressurize a space that is formed between the pistonhead 108 and the molten metal 134 flowing into the housing 102 during the return stroke of the piston 104 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c, as discussed more fully hereinafter. The space between the pistonhead 108 and molten metal 134 is formed during the reciprocal movement of the piston 104 within the housing 102, and is identified in Fig. 3 with reference numeral 148 for the exemplary injector 100 shown in Fig. 3.

[0071] In order for gas from the gas supply source 144 to flow to the space 148 formed between the pistonhead 108 and molten metal 134, the pistonhead 108 has a slightly smaller outer diameter than the inner diameter of the housing 102. Accordingly, there is very little to no wear between the pistonhead 108 and housing 102 during operation of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c. The gas control valves 146a, 146b, 146c are configured to pressurize the space 148 formed between the pistonhead 108 and molten metal 134 as well as vent the space 148 to atmospheric pressure at the end of each displacement stroke of the piston 104. For example, the gas control valves 146a, 146b, 146c each have a singular valve body with two separately controlled ports, one for “venting” the space 148 and the second for “pressurizing” the space 148

as discussed herein. The separate vent and pressurization ports may be actuated by a single multi-position device, which is remotely controlled. Alternatively, the gas control valves 146a, 146b, 146c may be replaced in each case by two separately controlled valves, such as a vent valve and a gas supply valve, as discussed herein in connection with Fig. 6. Either configuration is preferred.

[0072] The molten metal supply system 90 further includes respective pressure transducers 149a, 149b, 149c connected to the housing 102 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c and used to monitor the pressure in the space 148 during operation of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c.

[0073] The injector 100 optionally further includes a floating thermal insulation barrier 150 located in the space 148 to separate the pistonhead 108 from direct contact with the molten metal 134 received in the housing 102 during the reciprocal movement of the piston 104. The insulation barrier 150 floats within the housing 102 during operation of the injector 100, but generally remains in contact with the molten metal 134 received into the housing 102. The insulation barrier 150 may be made of, for example, graphite or an equivalent material suitable for use with molten aluminum or aluminum alloys.

[0074] The molten metal supply system 90 further includes a control unit 160, such as a programmable computer (PC) or a programmable logic controller (PLC), for individually controlling the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c. The control unit 160 is provided to control the operation of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c and, in particular, to control the movement of the piston 104 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c, as well as the operation of the gas control valves 146a, 146b, 146c, whether provided in a single valve or multiple valve form. Consequently, the individual injection cycles of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c may be controlled within the molten metal supply system 90, as discussed further herein.

[0075] The "central" control unit 160 is connected to the hydraulic actuator 114 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c and to the gas control valves 146a, 146b, 146c to control the sequencing and operation of the hydraulic actuator 114 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c and the operation of the gas control valves 146a, 146b, 146c. The pressure transducers 149a, 149b, 149c connected to the housing 102 of each of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c are used to provide respective input signals to the control unit 160. In general, the control unit 160 is utilized to activate the hydraulic actuator 114 controlling the movement of the piston 104 of each

of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c and the operation of the respective gas control valves 146a, 146b, 146c for the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c, such that the piston 104 of at least one of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c is always moving through its displacement stroke to continuously deliver molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140 at a substantially constant flow rate and pressure. The pistons 104 of the remaining injectors 100a, 100b, 100c may be in a recovery mode wherein the pistons 104 are moving through their return strokes, or finishing their displacement strokes. Thus, in view of the foregoing, at least one of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c is always in "operation", providing molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140 while the pistons 104 of the remaining injectors 100a, 100b, 100c are recovering and moving through their return strokes (or finishing their displacement strokes).

[0076] Referring to Figs. 3-5, operation of one of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c incorporated in the molten metal supply system 90 of Fig. 2 will now be discussed. In particular, the operation of one of the injectors 100 through one complete injection cycle (i.e., return stroke and displacement stroke) will now be discussed. Fig. 3 shows the injector 100 at a point just prior to the piston 104 beginning a displacement (i.e., downward) stroke in the housing 102, having just finished its return stroke. The space 148 between the pistonhead 108 and the molten metal 134 is substantially filled with gas from the gas supply source 144, which was supplied through the gas control valve 146. The gas control valve 146 is operable to supply gas from the gas supply source 144 to the space 148 (i.e., pressurize), vent the space 148 to atmospheric pressure, and to close off the gas filled space 148 when necessary during the reciprocal movement of the piston 104 in the housing 102.

[0077] As stated hereinabove, in Fig. 3 the piston 104 has completed its return stroke within the housing 102 and is ready to begin a displacement stroke. The gas control valve 146 is in a closed position, which prevents the gas in the gas filled space 148 from discharging to atmospheric pressure. The location of the piston 104 within the housing 102 in Fig. 3 is represented by point D in Fig. 5. The control unit 160 sends a signal to the hydraulic actuator 114 to begin moving the piston 104 downward through its displacement stroke. As the piston 104 moves downward in the housing 102, the gas in the gas filled space 148 is compressed *in situ* between the pistonhead 108 and the molten metal 134 received in the housing 102, substantially reducing its volume and increasing the pressure in the gas filled space 148. The pressure transducer 149 monitors the pressure in the gas filled space 148 and provides this

information as a process value input to the control unit 160.

[0078] When the pressure in the gas filled space 148 reaches a “critical” level, the molten metal 134 in the housing 102 begins to flow into the port 138 and out of the housing 102 through the second check valve 142. The critical pressure level will be dependent upon the downstream process to which the molten metal 134 is being delivered through the outlet manifold 140 (shown in Fig. 2). For example, the outlet manifold 140 may be connected to a metal extrusion process or a metal rolling process. These processes will provide different amounts of return or “back pressure” to the injector 100. The injector 100 must overcome this back pressure before the molten metal 134 will begin to flow out of the housing 102. The amount of back pressure experienced at the injector 100 will also vary, for example, from one downstream extrusion process to another. Thus, the critical pressure at which the molten metal 134 will begin to flow from the housing 102 is process dependent and its determination is within the skill of those skilled in the art. The pressure in the gas filled space 148 is continuously monitored by the pressure transducer 149, which is used to identify the critical pressure at which the molten metal 134 begins to flow from the housing 102. The pressure transducer 149 provides this information as an input signal (i.e., process value input) to the control unit 160.

[0079] At approximately this point in the displacement movement of the piston 104 (i.e., when the molten metal 134 begins to flow from the housing 102), the control unit 160, based upon the input signal received from the pressure transducer 149, regulates the downward movement of the hydraulic actuator 114, which controls the downward movement (i.e., speed) of the piston 104, and ultimately, the flow rate at which the molten metal 134 is displaced from the housing 102 through the port 138 and to the outlet manifold 140. For example, the control unit 160 may speed up or slow down the downward movement of the hydraulic actuator 114 depending on the molten metal flow rate desired at the outlet manifold 140 and the ultimate downstream process. Thus, the control of the hydraulic actuator 114 provides the ability to control the molten metal flow rate to the outlet manifold 140. The insulation barrier 150 and compressed gas filled space 148 separate the end of the pistonhead 108 from direct contact with the molten metal 134 throughout the displacement stroke of the piston 104. In particular, the molten metal 134 is displaced from the housing 102 in advance of the floating insulation barrier 150, the compressed gas filled space 148, and the pistonhead 108. Eventually, the piston 104 reaches the end of the downstroke or displacement stroke, which is represented by point E in Fig.

5. At the end of the displacement stroke of the piston 104, the gas filled space 148 is tightly compressed and may generate extremely high pressures on the order of greater than 20,000 psi.

[0080] After the piston 104 reaches the end of the displacement stroke (point E in Fig. 5), the piston 104 optionally moves upward in the housing 102 through a short “reset” or return stroke. To move the piston 104 through the reset stroke, the control unit 160 actuates the hydraulic actuator 114 to move the piston 104 upward in the housing 102. The piston 104 moves upward a short “reset” distance in the housing 102 to a position represented by point A in Fig. 5.

The optional short reset or return stroke of the piston 104 is shown as a broken line in Fig. 5. By moving upward a short reset distance within the housing 102, the volume of the compressed gas filled space 148 increases thereby reducing the gas pressure in the gas filled space 148. As stated previously, the injector 100 is capable of generating high pressures in the gas filled space 148 on the order of greater than 20,000 psi. Accordingly, the short reset stroke of the piston 104 in the housing 102 may be utilized as a safety feature to partially relieve the pressure in the gas filled space 148 prior to venting the gas filled space 148 to atmospheric pressure through the gas control valve 146. This feature protects the housing 102, annular pressure seal 120, and gas control valve 146 from damage when the gas filled space 148 is vented. Additionally, as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, the volume of gas compressed in the gas filled space 148 is relatively small, so even though relatively high pressures are generated in the gas filled space 148, the amount of stored energy present in the compressed gas filled space 148 is low.

[0081] At point A, the gas control valve 146 is operated by the control unit 160 to an open or vent position to allow the gas in the gas filled space 148 to vent to atmospheric pressure, or to a gas recycling system (not shown). As shown in Fig. 5, the piston 104 only retracts a short reset stroke in the housing 102 before the gas control valve 146 is operated to the vent position. Thereafter, the piston 104 is operated (by the control unit 160 through the hydraulic actuator 114) to move downward to again reach the previous displacement stroke position within the housing 102, which is identified by point B in Fig. 5. If the reset stroke is not followed, the gas filled space 148 is vented to atmospheric pressure (or the gas recycling system) at point E and the piston 104 may begin the return stroke within the housing 102, which will also begin at point B in Fig. 5.

[0082] At point B, the gas control valve 146 is operated by the control unit 160 from the vent position to a closed position and the piston 104 begins the return or upstroke in the housing

102. The piston 104 is moved through the return stroke by the hydraulic actuator 114, which is signaled by the control unit 160 to begin moving the piston 104 upward in the housing 102. During the return stroke of the piston 104, molten metal 134 from the molten metal supply source 132 flows into the housing 102. In particular, as the piston 104 begins moving through the return stroke, the pistonhead 108 begins to form the space 148, which is now substantially at sub-atmospheric (i.e., vacuum) pressure. This causes molten metal 134 from the molten metal supply source 132 to enter the housing 102 through the first check valve 136. As the piston 104 continues to move upward in the housing 102, the molten metal 134 continues to flow into the housing 102. At a certain point during the return stroke of the piston 104, which is represented by point C in Fig. 5, the housing 102 is preferably completely filled with molten metal 134. Point C may also be a preselected point where a preselected amount of the molten metal 134 is received into the housing. However, it is preferred that point C correspond to the point during the return stroke of the piston 104 that the housing 102 is substantially full of molten metal 134. At point C, the gas control valve 146 is operated by the control unit 160 to a position placing the housing 102 in fluid communication with the gas supply source 144, which pressurizes the "vacuum" space 148 with gas, such as argon or nitrogen, forming a new gas filled space (i.e., a "gas charge") 148. The piston 104 continues to move upward in the housing 102 as the gas filled space 148 is pressurized.

[0083] At point D (i.e., the end of the return stroke of the piston 104) during the gas control valve 146 is operated by the control unit 160 to a closed position, which prevents further charging of gas to the gas filled space 148 formed between the pistonhead 108 and molten metal 134, as well as preventing the discharge of gas to atmospheric pressure. The control unit 160 further signals the hydraulic actuator 114 to stop moving the piston 104 upward in the housing 102. As stated, the end of the return stroke of the piston 104 is represented by point D in Fig. 5, and may coincide with the full return stroke position of the piston 104 (i.e., the maximum possible upward movement of the piston 104) within the housing 102, but not necessarily. When the piston 104 reaches the end of the return stroke (i.e., the position of the piston 104 shown in Fig. 3), the piston 104 may be moved downward through another displacement stroke and the injection cycle illustrated in Fig. 5 begins over again.

[0084] As will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, the gas control valve 146 utilized in the injection cycle described hereinabove will require appropriate sequential and

separate actuation of the gas supply (i.e., pressurization) and vent functions (i.e., ports) of the control valve 146 of the injector 100. The embodiment of the present invention in which the gas supply (i.e., pressurization) and vent functions are preformed by two individual valves would also require sequential activation of the valves. The embodiment of the molten supply system 90 wherein the gas control valve 146 is replaced by two separate valves in the injector 100 is shown in Fig. 6. In Fig. 6, the gas supply and vent functions are performed by two individual valves 162, 164 that operate, respectively, as gas supply and vent valves.

[0085] With the operation of one of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c through a complete injection cycle now described, operation of the molten metal supply system 90 will now be described with reference to Figs. 2-5 and 8. The molten metal supply system 90 is generally configured to sequentially or serially operate the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c such that at least one of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c is operating to supply molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140. In particular, the molten metal supply system 90 is configured to operate the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c such that the piston 104 of at least one of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c is moving through a displacement stroke while the pistons 104 of the remaining injectors 100a, 100b, 100c are recovering and moving through their return strokes or finishing their displacement strokes.

[0086] As shown in Fig. 7, the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c each sequentially follow the same movement described hereinabove in connection with Fig. 5, but begin their injection cycles at different (i.e., "staggered") times so that the arithmetic average of their delivery strokes results in a constant molten metal flow rate and pressure being provided to the outlet manifold 140 and the ultimate downstream process. The arithmetic average of the injection cycles of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c is represented by broken line K in Fig. 7. The control unit 160, described previously, is used to sequence the operation of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c and gas control valves 146a, 146, 146c to automate the process described hereinafter.

[0087] In Fig. 7, the first injector 100a begins its downward movement at point D_a, which corresponds to time equal to zero (i.e., t=0). The piston 104 of the first injector 100a follows its displacement stroke in the manner described in connection with Fig. 5. During the displacement stroke of the piston 104 of the first injector 100a, the injector 100a supplies molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140 through its port 138. As the piston 104 of the first injector 100a nears the end of its displacement stroke at point N_a, the piston 104 of the second injector 100b begins its displacement stroke at point D_b. The piston 104 of the second injector 100b follows its

displacement stroke in the manner described in connection with Fig. 5 and substantially takes over supplying the molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140. As may be seen in Fig. 7, the displacement strokes of the pistons 104 of the first and second injectors 100a, 100b overlap for a short period until the piston 104 of the first injector 100a reaches the end of its displacement stroke represented by point E_a.

[0088] After the piston 104 of the first injector 100a reaches point E_a (i.e., the end of the displacement stroke), the first injector 100a may sequence through the short reset stroke and venting procedure discussed previously in connection with Fig. 5. The piston 104 then returns to the end of the displacement stroke at point B_a before beginning its return stroke. Alternatively, the first injector 100a may be sequenced to vent the gas filled space 148 at point E_a, and its piston 104 may begin a return stroke at point B_a in the manner described previously in connection with Fig. 5.

[0089] As the piston 104 of the first injector 100a moves through its return stroke, the piston 104 of the second injector 100b moves near the end of its displacement stroke at point N_b. Substantially simultaneously with the second injector 100b reaching point N_b, the piston 104 of the third injector 100c begins to move through its displacement stroke at point D_c. The first injector 100a simultaneously continues its upward movement and is preferably completely refilled with molten metal 134 at point C_a. The piston 104 of the third injector 100c follows its displacement stroke in the manner described previously in connection with Fig. 5, and the third injector 100c now substantially takes over supplying the molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140 from the first and second injectors 100a, 100b. However, as may be seen from Fig. 7 the displacement strokes of the pistons 104 of the second and third injectors 100b, 100c now partially overlap for a short period until the piston 104 of the second injector 100b reaches the end of its displacement stroke at point E_b.

[0090] After the piston 104 of the second injector 100b reaches point E_b (i.e., the end of the displacement stroke), the second injector 100b may sequence through the short reset stroke and venting procedure discussed previously in connection with Fig. 5. The piston 104 then returns to the end of the displacement stroke at point B_b before beginning its return stroke. Alternatively, the second injector 100b may be sequenced to vent the gas filled space 148 at point E_b, and its piston 104 may begin a return stroke at point B_b in the manner described previously in connection with Fig. 5. At approximately point A_b of the piston 104 of the second

injector 100b, the first injector 100a is substantially fully recovered and ready for another displacement stroke. Thus, the first injector 100a is poised to take over supplying the molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140 when the third injector 100c reaches the end of its displacement stroke.

[0091] The first injector 100a is held at point D_a for a slack period S_a until the piston 104 of the third injector 100c nears the end of its displacement stroke at point N_c . The piston 104 of the second injector 100b simultaneously moves through its return stroke and the second injector 100b recovers. After the slack period S_a , the piston 104 of the first injector 100a begins another displacement stroke to provide continuous molten metal flow to the outlet manifold 140. Eventually, the piston 104 of the third injector 100c reaches the end of its displacement stroke at point E_c .

[0092] After the piston 104 of the third injector 100c reaches point E_c (i.e., the end of the displacement stroke), the third injector 100c may sequence through the short reset stroke and venting procedure discussed previously in connection with Fig. 5. The piston 104 then returns to the end of the displacement stroke at point B_c before beginning its return stroke. Alternatively, the third injector 100c may be sequenced to vent the gas filled space 148 at point E_c , and its piston 104 may begin a return stroke at point B_c in the manner described previously in connection with Fig. 5. At point A_c , the second injector 100b is substantially fully recovered and is poised to take over supplying the molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140. However, the second injector 100b is held for a slack period S_b until the piston 104 of the third injector 100c begins its return stroke. During the slack period S_b , the first injector 100a supplies the molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140. The third injector 100c is held for a similar slack period S_c when the piston 104 of the first injector 100a again nears the end of its displacement stroke (point N_a).

[0093] In summary, the process described hereinabove is continuous and controlled by the control unit 160, as discussed previously. The injectors 100a, 100b, 100c are respectively actuated by the control unit 160 to sequentially or serially move through their injection cycles such that at least one of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c is supplying molten metal 134 to the outlet manifold 140. Thus, at least one of the pistons 104 of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c is moving through its displacement stroke, while the remaining pistons 104 of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c are moving through their return strokes or finishing their displacement strokes.

[0094] Fig. 8 shows a second embodiment of the molten metal supply system of the present invention and is designated with reference numeral 190. The molten metal supply system 190 shown in Fig. 8 is similar to the molten metal supply system 90 discussed previously, with the molten metal supply system 190 now configured to operate with a liquid medium rather than a gas medium. The molten metal supply system 190 includes a plurality of molten metal injectors 200, which are separately identified with "a", "b", and "c" designations for clarity. The injectors 200a, 200b, 200c are similar to the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c discussed previously, but are now specifically adapted to operate with a viscous liquid source and pressurizing medium. The injectors 200a, 200b, 200c and their component parts are described hereinafter in terms of a single injector "200".

[0095] The injector 200 includes an injector housing 202 and a piston 204 positioned to extend downward into the housing 202 and reciprocally operate within the housing 202. The piston 204 includes a piston rod 206 and a pistonhead 208. The pistonhead 208 may be formed separately from and fixed to the piston rod 206 by means customary in the art, or formed integrally with the piston rod 206. The piston rod 206 includes a first end 210 and a second end 212. The pistonhead 208 is connected to the first end 210 of the piston rod 206. The second end 212 of the piston rod 206 is connected to a hydraulic actuator or ram 214 for driving the piston 204 through its reciprocal motion within the housing 202. The piston rod 206 is connected to the hydraulic actuator 214 by a self-aligning coupling 216. The injector 200 is also preferably suitable for use with molten aluminum and aluminum alloys, and the other metals discussed previously in connection with the injector 100. Accordingly, the housing 202, piston rod 206, and pistonhead 208 may be made of any of the materials discussed previously in connection with the housing 102, piston rod 106, and pistonhead 108 of the injector 100. The pistonhead 208 may also be made of refractory material or graphite.

[0096] As stated hereinabove, the injector 200 differs from the injector 100 described previously in connection with Figs. 3-5 in that the injector 200 is specifically adapted to use a liquid medium as a viscous liquid source and pressurizing medium. For this purpose, the molten metal supply system 190 further includes a liquid chamber 224 positioned on top of and in fluid communication with the housing 202 of each of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c. The liquid chamber 224 is filled with a liquid medium 226. The liquid medium 226 is preferably a highly viscous liquid, such as a molten salt. A suitable viscous liquid for the liquid medium is boron

oxide.

[0097] As with the injector 100 described previously, the piston 204 of the injector 200 is configured to reciprocally operate within the housing 202 and move through a return stroke in which molten metal is received into the housing 202, and a displacement stroke for displacing the molten metal received into the housing 202 from the housing 202 to a downstream process. However, the piston 204 is further configured to retract upward into the liquid chamber 224. A liner 230 is provided on the inner surface of the housing 202 of the injector 200, and may be made of any of the materials discussed previously in connection with the liner 130.

[0098] The molten metal supply system 190 further includes a molten metal supply source 232. The molten metal supply source 232 is provided to maintain a steady supply of molten metal 234 to the housing 202 of each of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c. The molten metal supply source 232 may contain any of the metals or metal alloys discussed previously in connection with the molten metal supply system 90.

[0099] The injector 200 further includes a first valve 236. The injector 200 is in fluid communication with the molten metal supply source 232 through the first valve 236. In particular, the housing 202 of the injector 200 is in fluid communication with the molten metal supply source 232 through the first valve 236, which is preferably a check valve for preventing backflow of molten metal 234 to the molten metal supply source 232 during the displacement stroke of the piston 204. Thus, the first check valve 236 permits inflow of molten metal 234 to the housing 202 during the return stroke of the piston 204.

[00100] The injector 200 further includes an intake/injection port 238. The first check valve 236 preferably is located in the intake/injection port 238 (hereinafter "port 238"), which is connected to the lower end of the housing 232. The port 238 may be fixedly connected to the lower end of the housing 202 by means customary in the art, or formed integrally with the housing 202.

[00101] The molten metal supply system 190 further includes an outlet manifold 240 for supplying molten metal 234 to a downstream process. The injectors 200a, 200b, 200c are each in fluid communication with the outlet manifold 240. In particular, the port 238 of each of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c is used as the inlet or intake into each of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c, and further used to distribute (i.e., inject) the molten metal 234 displaced from the housing 202 of the respective injectors 200a, 200b, 200c to the outlet manifold 240.

[00102] The injector 200 further includes a second check valve 242, which is preferably located in the port 238. The second check valve 242 is similar to the first check valve 236, but is now configured to provide an exit conduit for the molten metal 234 received into the housing 202 of the injector 200 to be displaced from the housing 202 and into the outlet manifold 240.

[00103] The pistonhead 208 of the injector 200 may be cylindrically shaped and received in a cylindrically shaped housing 202. The pistonhead 208 further defines a circumferentially extending recess 248. The recess 248 is located such that as the piston 204 is retracted upward into the liquid chamber 224 during its return stroke, the liquid medium 226 from the liquid chamber 224 fills the recess 248. The recess 248 remains filled with the liquid medium 226 throughout the return and displacement strokes of the piston 204. However, with each return stroke of the piston 204 upward into the liquid chamber 224, a “fresh” supply of the liquid medium 226 fills the recess 248. In order for liquid medium 226 from the liquid chamber 224 to remain in the recess 248, the pistonhead 208 has a slightly smaller outer diameter than the inner diameter of the housing 202. Accordingly, there is very little to no wear between the pistonhead 208 and housing 202 during operation of the injector 200, and the highly viscous liquid medium 226 prevents the molten metal 234 received into the housing 202 from flowing upward into the liquid chamber 224.

[00104] The end portion of the pistonhead 208 defining the recess 248 may be dispensed with entirely, such that during the return and displacement strokes of the piston 204, a layer or column of the liquid medium 226 is present between the pistonhead 208 and the molten metal 234 received into the housing 202 and is used to force the molten metal 234 from the housing 202 ahead of the piston 204 of the injector 200. This is analogous to the “gas filled space” of the injector 100 discussed previously.

[00105] Because of the large volume of liquid medium 226 contained in the liquid chamber 224, the injector 200 generally does not require internal cooling as was the case with the injector 100 discussed previously. Additionally, because the injector 200 operates with a liquid medium the gas sealing arrangement (i.e., annular pressure seal 120) found in the injector 100 is not required. Thus, the cooling water jacket 128 discussed previously in connection with the injector 100 is also not required. As stated previously, a suitable liquid for the liquid chamber 224 is a molten salt, such as boron oxide, particularly when the molten metal 234

contained in the molten metal supply source 232 is an aluminum-based alloy. The liquid medium 226 contained in the liquid chamber 224 may be any liquid that is chemically inert or resistive (i.e., substantially non-reactive) to the molten metal 234 contained in the molten metal supply source 232.

[00106] The molten metal supply system 190 shown in Fig. 8 operates in an analogous manner to the molten metal supply system 90 discussed previously with minor variations. For example, because the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c operate with a liquid medium rather than a gas medium the gas control valves 146a, 146b, 146c are not required and the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c do not sequence move through the “reset” stroke and venting procedure discussed in connection with Fig. 5. In contrast, the liquid chamber 224 provides a steady supply of liquid medium 224 to the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c, which act to pressurize the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c. The liquid medium 224 may also provide certain cooling benefits to the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c.

[00107] Operation of the molten metal supply system 190 will now be discussed with continued reference to Fig. 8. The entire process described hereinafter is controlled by a control unit 260 (PC/PLC), which controls the operation and movement of the hydraulic actuator 214 connected to the piston 204 of each of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c and thus, the movement of the respective pistons 204. As was the case with the molten metal supply system 90 discussed previously, the control unit 160 sequentially or serially actuates the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c to continuously provide molten metal flow to the outlet manifold 240 at substantially constant operating pressures. Such sequential or serial actuation is accomplished by appropriate control of the hydraulic actuator 214 connected to the piston 204 of each of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c, as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art.

[00108] In Fig. 8, the piston 204 of the first injector 200a is shown at the end of its displacement stroke, having just finished injecting molten metal 234 into the outlet manifold 240. The piston 204 of the second injector 200b is moving through its displacement stroke and has taken over supplying the molten metal 234 to the outlet manifold 240. The third injector 200c has completed its return stroke and is fully “charged” with a new supply of the molten metal 234. The piston 204 of the third injector 200c preferably withdraws partially upward into the liquid chamber 224 during its return stroke (as shown in Fig. 8) so that the recess 248 formed in the pistonhead 208 is in substantial fluid communication with the liquid medium 226 in the

liquid chamber 224. The liquid medium 226 fills the recess 248 with a “fresh” supply of the liquid medium 226. Alternatively, the piston 204 may be retracted entirely upward into the liquid chamber 224 so that a layer or column of the liquid medium 226 separates the end of the piston 204 from contact with the molten metal 234 received into the housing 202. This situation is analogous to the “gas filled space” of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c, as stated previously. The pistons 204 of the remaining injectors 200a, 200b will follow similar movements during their return strokes.

[00109] Once the second injector 200b finishes its displacement stroke, the control unit 260 actuates the hydraulic actuator 214 attached to the piston 204 of the third injector 200c to move the piston 204 through its displacement stroke so that the third injector 200c takes over supplying the molten metal 234 to the outlet manifold 240. Thereafter, when the piston of the third injector 200c finishes its displacement stroke, the control unit 260 again actuates the hydraulic actuator 214 attached to the piston 204 of the first injector 200a to move the piston 204 through its displacement stroke so that the first injector 200a takes over supplying the molten metal 234 to the outlet manifold 240. Thus, the control unit 260 sequentially or serially operates the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c to automate the above-described procedure (i.e., staggered injection cycles of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c), which provides a continuous flow of molten metal 234 to the outlet manifold 240 at a substantially constant pressure.

[00110] The injectors 200a, 200b, 200c, each operate in the same manner during their injection cycles (i.e., return and displacement strokes). During the return stroke of the piston 204 of each of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c sub-atmospheric (i.e., vacuum) pressure is generated within the housing 202, which causes molten metal 234 from the molten metal supply source 232 to enter the housing 202 through the first check valve 236. As the piston 204 continues to move upward, the molten metal 234 from the molten metal supply source 232 flows in behind the pistonhead 208 to fill the housing 202. However, the highly viscous nature of the liquid medium 226 present in the recess 248 and above in the housing 202 prevents the molten metal 234 from flowing upward into the liquid chamber 224. The liquid medium 226 present in the recess 248 and above in the housing 202 provides a “viscous sealing” effect that prevents the upward flow of the molten metal 234 and further enables the piston 204 to develop high pressures in the housing 202 during the displacement stroke of the piston 204 of each of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c. The viscous liquid medium 226, as will be appreciated by those

skilled in the art, is present about the pistonhead 208 and the piston rod 206, as well as filling the recess 248. Thus, the liquid medium 226 contained within the housing 202 (i.e., about the pistonhead 208 and piston rod 206) separates the molten metal 234 flowing into the housing 202 from the liquid chamber 224, providing a “viscous sealing” effect within the housing 202.

[00111] During the displacement stroke of the piston 204 of each of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c, the first check valve 236 prevents back flow of the molten metal 234 to the molten metal supply source 232 in a similar manner to the first check valve 136 of the injectors 100a, 100b, 100c. The liquid medium 226 present in the recess 248, about the pistonhead 208 and piston rod 206, and further up in the housing 202 the viscous sealing effect between the molten metal 234 being displaced from the housing 202 and the liquid medium 226 present in the liquid chamber 224. In addition, the liquid medium 226 present in the recess 248, about the pistonhead 208 and piston rod 206, and further up in the housing 202 is compressed during the downstroke of the piston 204 generating high pressures within the housing 202 that force the molten metal 234 received into the housing 202 from the housing 202. Because the liquid medium 226 is substantially incompressible, the injector 200 reaches the “critical” pressure discussed previously in connection with the injector 100 very quickly. As the molten metal 234 begins to flow from the housing 202, the hydraulic actuator 214 may be used to control the molten metal flow rate at which the molten metal 234 is delivered to the downstream process for each respective injector 200a, 200b, 200c.

[00112] In summary, the control unit 260 sequentially actuates the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c to continuously provide the molten metal 234 to the outlet manifold 240. This is accomplished by staggering the movements of the pistons 204 of the injectors 200a, 200b, 200c so that at least one of the pistons 204 is always moving through a displacement stroke. Accordingly, the molten metal 234 is supplied continuously and at a substantially constant operating or working pressure to the outlet manifold 240.

[00113] Finally, referring to Figs. 8 and 9, the molten metal supply system 200 is shown connected to the outlet manifold 240, as discussed previously. The outlet manifold 240 is further shown supplying molten metal 234 to an exemplary downstream process. The exemplary downstream process is a continuous extrusion apparatus 300. The extrusion apparatus 300 is adapted to form solid circular rods of uniform cross section. The extrusion apparatus 300 includes a plurality of extrusion conduits 302, each of which is adapted to form a single circular

rod. The extrusion conduits 302 each include a heat exchanger 304 and an outlet die 306. Each of the heat exchangers 304 is in fluid communication (separately through the respective extrusion conduits 302) with the outlet manifold 240 for receiving molten metal 234 from the outlet manifold 240 under the influence of the molten metal injectors 200a, 200b, 200c. The molten metal injectors 200a, 200b, 200c provide the motive forces necessary to inject the molten metal 234 into the outlet manifold 240 and further deliver the molten metal 234 to the respective extrusion conduits 302 under constant pressure. The heat exchangers 304 are provided to cool and partially solidify the molten metal 234 passing therethrough to the outlet die 306 during operation of the molten metal supply system 190. The outlet die 306 is sized and shaped to form the solid rod of substantially uniform cross section. A plurality of water sprays 308 may be provided downstream of the outlet die 306 for each of the extrusion conduits 302 to fully solidify the formed rods. The extrusion apparatus 300 generally described hereinabove is just one example of the type of downstream apparatus or process with which the molten metal supply systems 90, 190 of the present invention may be utilized. As indicated, the gas operated molten metal supply system 90 may also be in connection with the extrusion apparatus 300.

[00114] Referring now to Figs. 10-25 specific downstream metal forming processes utilizing the molten metal supply systems 90, 190 are shown. The downstream metal forming metal processes are discussed hereinafter with reference to the molten metal supply system 90 of Fig. 2 as the system providing molten metal to the process. However, it will be apparent that the molten metal supply system 190 of Fig. 8 may also be utilized in this role.

[00115] Fig. 10 generally shows an apparatus 400 for forming a plurality of continuous metal articles 402 of indefinite length. The apparatus includes the manifold 140 discussed previously, which is referred to hereinafter as "outlet manifold 140". The outlet manifold 140 receives molten metal 132 at substantially constant flow rate and pressure from the molten metal supply system 90 in the manner discussed previously. The molten metal 132 is held under pressure in the outlet manifold 140. The apparatus 400 further includes a plurality of outlet dies 404 attached to the outlet manifold 140. The outlet dies 404 may be fixedly attached to the outlet manifold 140 as shown in Fig. 10 or integrally formed with the body of the outlet manifold 140. The outlet dies 404 are shown attached to the outlet manifold 140 with conventional fasteners 406 (i.e., bolts). The outlet dies 404 are further shown in Fig. 10 as being a different material from the outlet manifold 140, but may be made of the same material as the

outlet manifold 140 and integrally formed therewith.

[00116] Referring to Figs. 10-12, the outlet dies 404 each include a die housing 408, which is affixed to the outlet manifold 140 in the manner discussed previously. The die housing 408 of each of the outlet dies 404 defines a central die passage 410 in fluid communication with the outlet manifold 140. The die housing 408 defines a die aperture 412 for discharging the respective metal articles 402 from the outlet dies 404. The die passage 410 provides a conduit for molten metal transport from the outlet manifold 140 to the die aperture 412, which is used to shape the metal article 402 into its intended cross sectional form. The outlet dies 404 may be used to produce the same type of continuous metal article 402 or different types of metal articles 402, as discussed further hereinafter. In Fig. 10, two of the outlet dies 404 are configured to form metal articles 402 as circular shaped cross section tubes having an annular or hollow cross section as shown in 12b, and two of the outlet dies 404 are configured to form metal articles 402 as solid rods or bars also having a circular shaped cross section as shown in Fig. 11b.

[00117] The die housing 408 of each of the outlet dies 404 further defines a cooling cavity or chamber 414 that at least partially surrounds the die passage 410 for cooling the molten metal 132 flowing through the die passage 410 to the die aperture 412. The cooling cavity or chamber 414 may also take the form of cooling conduits as shown in Figs. 18 and 19 discussed hereinafter. The cooling chamber 414 is provided to cool and solidify the molten metal 132 in the die passage 410 such that the molten metal 132 is fully solidified before it reaches the die aperture 412.

[00118] A plurality of rolls 416 is optionally associated with each of the outlet dies 404. The rolls 416 are positioned to contact the formed metal articles 402 downstream of the respective die apertures 412 and, more particularly, frictionally engage the metal articles 402 to provide backpressure to the molten metal 132 in the outlet manifold 140. The rolls 416 also serve as braking mechanisms used to slow the discharge of the metal articles 402 from the outlet dies 404. Due to the high pressures generated by the molten metal supply system 90 and present in the outlet manifold 140, a braking system is beneficial for slowing the discharge of the metal articles 402 from the outlet dies 404. This ensures that the metal articles 402 are fully solidified and cooled prior to exiting the outlet dies 404. A plurality of cooling sprays 418 may be located downstream from the outlet dies 404 to further cool the metal articles 402 discharging from the

outlet dies 404.

[00119] As discussed previously, Fig. 10 shows the apparatus 400 with two outlet dies 404 configured to form annular cross section metal articles 402 having a circular shape (i.e., tubes), and with two of the outlet dies 404 configured to form solid cross section metal articles 402 having a circular shape (i.e., rods). Thus, the apparatus 400 is capable of simultaneously forming different types of metal articles 402. The particular configuration in Fig. 10 wherein the apparatus 400 includes four outlet dies 404, two for producing annular cross section metal articles 402 and two for producing solid cross section metal articles 402, is merely exemplary for explaining the apparatus 400 and the present invention is not limited to this particular arrangement. The four outlet dies 404 in Fig. 10 may be used to produce four different types of metal articles 402. Additionally, the use of four outlet dies 404 is merely exemplary and the apparatus 400 may have any number of outlet dies 400 in accordance with the present invention. Only one outlet die 404 is necessary in the apparatus 400.

[00120] The outlet die 404 used to form solid cross section metal rods will now be discussed with reference to Figs. 10 and 11. The outlet die 404 of Figs. 10 and 11 further includes a tear-drop shaped chamber 420 upstream of the die aperture 412. The chamber 412 defines a divergent-convergent shape and will be referred to hereinafter as a divergent-convergent chamber 420. The divergent-convergent chamber 420 is positioned just forward of the annular cooling chamber 414. The divergent-convergent chamber 420 is used to cold work solidified metal in the die passage 410, which is solidified as the molten metal 132 passes through the area of the die passage 410 bounded by the cooling chamber 414, prior to discharging the solidified metal through the die aperture 412. In particular, the molten metal 132 flows from the outlet manifold 140 and into the outlet die 404 through the die passage 410. The pressure provided by the molten metal supply system 90 causes the molten metal 132 to flow into the outlet die 404. The molten metal 132 remains in this molten state until the molten metal 132 passes through the area of the die passage 410 generally bounded by the cooling chamber 414. The molten metal 132 becomes semi-solidified in this area, and is preferably fully solidified before reaching the divergent-convergent chamber 420. The semi-solidified metal and fully solidified metal are separately designated with reference numerals 422 and 424 hereinafter.

[00121] The solidified metal 424 in the divergent-convergent chamber 420 exhibits an as-cast structure, which is not advantageous. The divergent-convergent shape of the

divergent-convergent chamber 420 works the solidified metal 424, which forms a wrought or worked microstructure. The worked microstructure improves the strength of the formed metal article 402, in this case a solid cross section rod having a circular shape. This process is generally akin to cold working metal to improve its strength and other properties, as is known in the art. The worked, solidified metal 424 is discharged under pressure through the die aperture 412 to form the continuous metal article 402. In this case, as stated, the metal article 402 is a solid cross section metal rod 402.

[00122] As will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, the process for forming the metal article 402 (i.e., solid circular rod) described hereinabove has numerous mechanical benefits. The molten metal supply system 90 delivers molten metal 132 to the apparatus 400 at constant pressure and flow rate and is thus a “steady state” system. Accordingly, there is theoretically no limit to the length of the formed metal article 402. There is better dimensional control of the cross section of the metal article 402 because there is no “die pressure” and “die temperature” transients. There is also better dimensional control through the length of the metal article 402 (i.e., no transients). Additionally, the extrusion ratio may be based on product performance and not on process requirements. The extrusion ratio may be reduced, which results in extended die life for the die aperture 412. Further, there is less die distortion due to low die pressure (i.e., high temperature, low speed).

[00123] As will be further appreciated by those skilled in the art, the process for forming the metal article 402 (i.e., solid circular rod) described hereinabove has numerous metallurgical benefits for the resulting metal article 402. These benefits generally include: (a) elimination of surface liquation and shrinkage porosity; (b) reduction of macrosegregation; (c) elimination of the need for homogenization and reheat treatment steps required in the prior art; (d) increased potential of obtaining unrecrystallized structures (i.e., low Z deformation); (e) better seam weld in tubular structures (as discussed hereinafter); and (f) the elimination of structure variations through the length of the metal article 402 because of the steady state nature of the forming process.

[00124] From an economic standpoint, the foregoing process eliminates in-process inventory and integrates the casting, preheating, reheating, and extrusion steps, which are present in the prior art process discussed previously in connection with Fig. 1, into one step. Additionally, there is no wasted metal in the described process such as that generated in the

previously discussed prior art process. Often, in the prior art extrusion process the extruded product must be trimmed and/or scalped, which is not required in the instant process. All of the foregoing benefits apply to each of the different metal articles 402 formed in the apparatus 400 that are discussed hereinafter.

[00125] Referring now to Figs. 10 and 12, the apparatus 400 may be used to form metal articles 402 having an annular or hollow cross section, such as the hollow tube shown in Fig. 12b. The apparatus 400 for this application further includes a mandrel 426 positioned in the die passage 410. The mandrel 426 preferably extends into the outlet manifold 140, as shown in Fig. 10. The mandrel 426 is preferably internally cooled by circulating a coolant into the interior of the mandrel 426. The coolant may be supplied to the mandrel 426 via a conduit 428 extending into the center of the mandrel 426. The divergent-convergent chamber 420 is again used to work the solidified metal 424 to form a wrought structure in the solidified metal 424 prior to forcing or discharging the solidified metal 424 through the die aperture 412, which forms the annular cross section metal article 402 (i.e., circular shaped tube). The resulting annular cross section metal article 402 is “seamless” meaning that a weld is not required to form the circular structure, as is common practice in the manufacture of pipes and tubes. Additionally, because the molten metal 132 is solidified as an annular structure, the wall of the resulting hollow tube may be made thin during the solidification process without further processing, which could weaken the properties of the metal.

[00126] As used in this disclosure, the term “circular” is intended to define not only true circles but also other “rounded” shapes such as ovals (i.e., shapes that are not perfect circles). The outlet dies 404 discussed hereinabove in connection with Figs. 11 and 12 are generally configured to form metal articles 402 generally having symmetrical circular cross sections. The term “symmetrical cross section” as used in this disclosure is intended to mean that a vertical cross section through the metal article 402 is symmetrical with respect to at least one axis passing through the cross section. For example, the circular cross section of Fig. 11b is symmetrical with respect to the diameter of the circle.

[00127] Figs. 13-16 shows an embodiment of the outlet die 404 used to form a polygonal shaped metal article 402. As shown in Figs. 14-16, the formed metal article 402 will have an L-shaped cross section. In particular, it will be obvious from Figs. 14-16 that the L-shaped (i.e., polygonal shaped cross section) is not symmetrical with respect to any axis passing

therethrough. Hence, the apparatus 400 of the present invention may be used to form asymmetrical shaped metal articles 402, such as the L-shaped bar formed by the outlet die 404 of Figs. 13-16.

[00128] The outlet die 404 of Figs. 13-16 is substantially similar to the outlet dies 404 discussed previously, but does not include a divergent-convergent chamber 420. Alternatively, the die passage 410 has a constant cross section that has the shape of the intended metal article 402, as the cross sectional view of Fig. 14 illustrates. The molten metal 132 passes through the die passage 410 in the manner discussed previously, and is solidified in the area bounded by the cooling chamber 414. The desired wrought structure for the solidified metal 424 is formed by working the solidified metal 424 at the die aperture 412. In particular, as the solidified metal 424 is forced from the larger cross sectional area defined by the die passage 410 into the smaller cross sectional area defined by the die aperture 412, the solidified metal 424 is worked to form the desired wrought structure. The die passage 410 is not limited to having generally the same cross sectional shape as the formed metal article 402. The die passage 410 may have a circular shape, such as that that could potentially be used for the die passage 410 of the outlet dies 404 of Figs. 11 and 12. The die passage 410 for the outlet die of Figs. 13-16 may further include the divergent-convergent chamber 420. Fig. 13 illustrates that the desired wrought structure for the solidified metal 424 may be achieved by forcing the solidified metal 424 through a die aperture 412 of reduced cross sectional area with respect to the cross sectional area defined by the upstream die passage 410. The die passage 410 may have the same general shape of the die aperture 412, but the present invention is not limited to this configuration.

[00129] Referring briefly to Figs. 22-25, other cross sectional shapes are possible for the continuous metal articles 402 formed by the apparatus 400 of the present invention. Figs. 22 and 23 show symmetrical, polygonal shaped cross section metal articles 402 that may be made in accordance with the present invention. Fig. 22 shows a polygonal shaped I-beam made by an outlet die 404 having an I-shaped die aperture 412. Fig. 23 shows a solid, polygonal shaped rod made by an outlet die 404 having a hexagonal shaped die aperture 412. The hexagonal cross section metal rod 402 formed by the outlet die 404 of Fig. 23 may be referred to as a profiled rod. Fig. 24 illustrates an annular metal article 402 in which the opening in the metal article 402 has a different shape than the overall shape of the metal article 402. In Fig. 24, the opening or annulus in the metal article 402 is square shaped while the overall shape of the

metal article 402 is circular. This may be achieved by using a square shaped mandrel 426 in the outlet die 404 of Fig. 12. Further, Fig. 25 illustrates an annular cross section metal article 402 having an overall polygonal shape (i.e., square shape). The die aperture 412 in the outlet die 404 of Fig. 25 is square shaped and a square shaped mandrel 426 is used to form the square shaped opening or annulus in the metal article 402. The metal article 402 of Fig. 25 may be referred to as a profiled tube.

[00130] Referring to Fig. 17, the present invention envisions that additional or secondary outlet dies may be used to further reduce the cross sectional area of the metal articles 402 and further work the solidified metal 424 forming the metal articles 402 to further improve the desired wrought structure. Fig. 17 shows a second or downstream outlet die 430 attached to the first or upstream outlet die 404. The second outlet die 430 may be attached to the outlet die 404 with mechanical fasteners (i.e., bolts) 432 as shown, or may be formed integrally with the outlet die 404. The embodiment of the outlet die 404 shown in Fig. 17 has a similar configuration to the outlet die 404 of Fig. 13, but may also have the configuration of the outlet die 404 of Fig. 11 (i.e., have a divergent-convergent chamber 420 etc.). The second outlet die 430 includes a housing 434 defining a die passage 436 and a die aperture 438 in a similar manner to the outlet dies 404 discussed previously. The second die passage 436 defines a smaller cross sectional area than the die aperture 412 of the upstream outlet die 404. The second die aperture 438 defines a reduced cross sectional area with respect to the second die passage 436. Additional cold working is carried out as the solidified metal 424 is forced through the second die aperture 438 from the second die passage 436, further improving the wrought structure of the solidified metal 424 forming the metal article 402 and increasing the strength of the metal article 402. The second outlet die 430 may be located immediately adjacent to the upstream outlet die 404, as illustrated, or further downstream from the outlet die 404. The second outlet die 430 also provides an additional cooling area for the solidified metal 424 to cool prior to exiting the apparatus 400, which improves the properties of the solidified metal 424 forming the metal article 402.

[00131] Referring to Figs. 18 and 20, the apparatus 400 may be adapted to form continuous metal plate as the metal article 402. The outlet die 404 of Fig. 18 has a die passage 410 that generally tapers toward the die aperture 412. The die aperture 412 is generally shaped to form the rectangular cross section of the continuous plate article 402 shown in Fig. 20. The

cooling chamber 420 is replaced with a pair of cooling conduits 440, 442, which generally bound the length of the die passage 410, as illustrated in Fig. 18. The molten metal 132 is cooled in the die passage 410 to form the semi-solid state metal 422 and finally solidified metal 424 in the die passage 410. The solidified metal 424 is initially worked to form the desired wrought structure by forcing the solidified metal 424 through the smaller cross sectional area defined by the die aperture 412. Additionally, the rolls 416 immediately adjacent the die aperture 412 are used to further reduce the height H of the continuous plate 402, which further works the continuous plate 402 and generates the wrought structure. The continuous plate 402 may have any length because the molten metal 132 is provided to the apparatus 400 in steady state manner. Thus, the apparatus 400 of the present invention is capable of providing rolled sheet metal in addition the rods and bars discussed previously. Additional conventional rolling operations may be carried out downstream of the rolls 416.

[00132] Referring to Figs. 19 and 21, the apparatus 400 may be adapted to form a continuous metal ingot as the metal article 402. The outlet die 404 of Fig. 19 has a die passage 410 that is generally divided into two portions. A first portion 450 of the die passage 410 has a generally constant cross section. A second portion 452 of the die passage 410 generally diverges to form the die aperture 412. The die aperture 412 is generally shaped to form the cross sectional shape of the ingot 402 shown in Fig. 21. The cross sectional shape may be polygonal as shown in Fig. 21a or circular as shown in Fig. 21b. The cooling chamber 420 is replaced by a pair of cooling conduits 454, 456, which generally bound the length of the first portion 450 of the die passage 410, as illustrated in Fig. 19. The molten metal 132 is cooled in the die passage 410 to form the semi-solid state metal 422 and finally solidified metal 424 in the first portion 450 of the die passage 410. The semi-solid metal 422 is preferably fully cooled forming the solidified metal 424 as the solidified metal 424 reaches the second, larger cross sectional second portion 452 of the die passage 410. The solidified metal 424 is initially worked to form the desired wrought structure as the solidified metal 424 diverges outward from the smaller cross sectional area defined by the first portion 450 of the die passage 410 into the larger cross sectional area defined by the second portion 452 of the die passage 410. Additionally, the rolls 416 immediately adjacent the die aperture 412 are used to further reduce the width W of the continuous ingot 402, which further works the continuous ingot 402 and generates the desired wrought structure. The continuous ingot 402 may have any length because the molten metal 132

is provided to the apparatus 400 in a steady state manner. Thus, the apparatus 400 of the present invention is capable of providing ingots of any desired length in addition to the continuous plate, rods, and bars discussed previously.

[00133] The continuous process described hereinabove may be used to form continuous metal articles of virtually any length and any cross sectional shape. The discussion hereinabove detailed the formation of continuous metal rods, bars, ingots, and plate. The process described hereinabove may be used to form both solid and annular cross sectional shapes. Such annular shapes form truly seamless conduits, such as hollow tubes or pipes. The process described hereinabove is also capable of forming metal articles having both symmetrical and asymmetrical cross sections. In summary, the continuous metal forming process described hereinabove is capable of (but not limited to): (a) providing high volume, low extrusion ratio stock shapes; (b) providing premium, thin wall, seamless metal articles such as hollow tubes and pipes; (c) providing asymmetrical cross section metal articles; and (d) providing non-heat treatable, distortion free, F temper metal articles that require no quenching or aging and have no quenching distortion and very low residual stress.

[00134] While preferred embodiments of the present invention were described herein, various modifications and alterations of the present invention may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention. The scope of the present invention is defined in the appended claims and equivalents thereto.